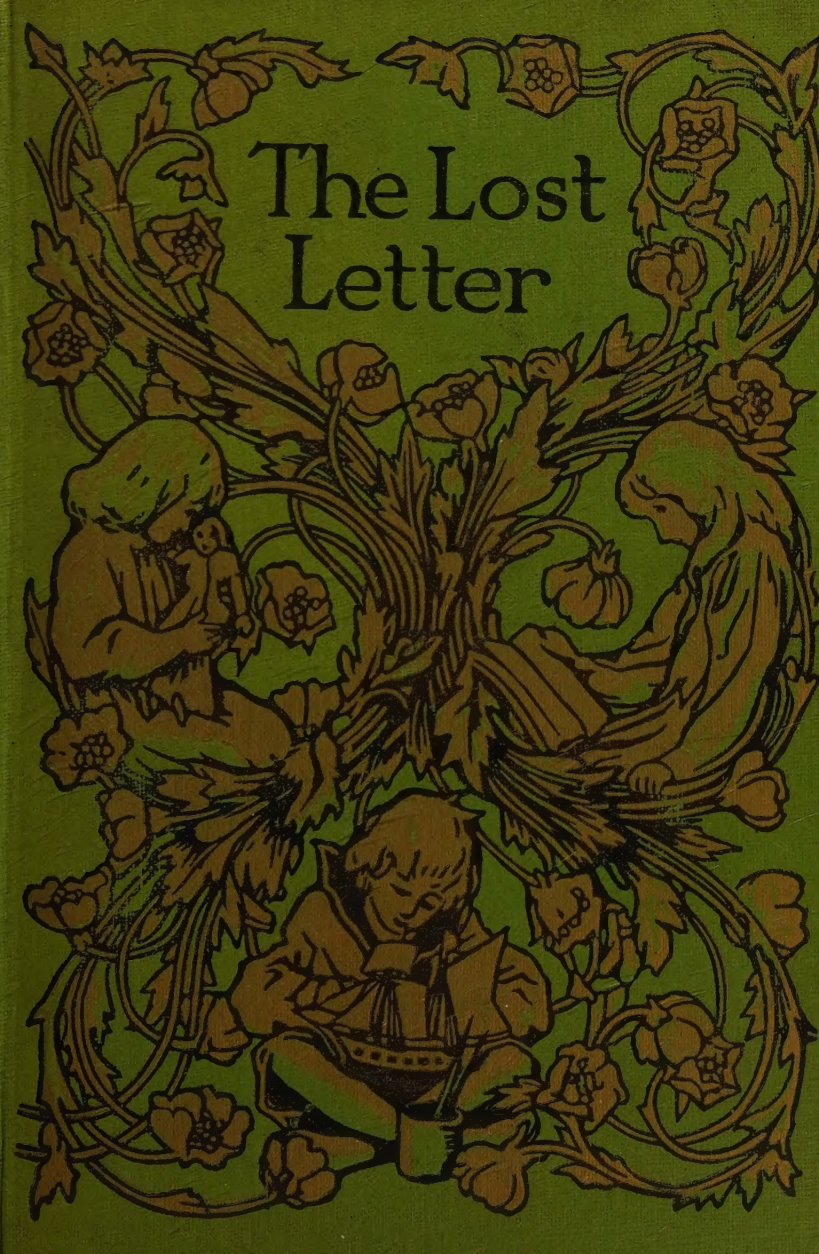
The Lost Letter



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"A distant bugle call came ringing through the hot air."

Page 19.

THE LOST LETTER

OR

The Adventures of a Postage Stamp

A Story of the Relief of Lucknow

BY

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE

AUTHOR OF "THE LITTLE V.C.,"

ETC. ETC.

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THE LOST LETTER.

CHAPTER I.

"THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMING."

"MOTHER! Aileen! what do you think? Big Donald declares he can hear the skirl of the bagpipes of the Ninety-third. He says he is *sure* it's the Ninety-third, and Mary is almost sure she hears it too. Hurrah! it's Sir Colin at last!"

A lady dressed in deep mourning raised an anxious face to the boy. She was seated in a corner of the ramparts of Lucknow Residency trying to get shelter from the sun.

"God grant it may be so, Charlie!" she replied. "If any one can distinguish such

a sound it is Big Donald. But hush, my boy; don't wake Aileen."

"I'm not asleep, mother," said a little girl of about ten years old, who was curled up on a cushion, her fair head with its short, curly rings of hair resting against her mother's knee. "I'm not asleep; but my head aches. And oh, Charlie, it's so hot!"

"Poor little girl!" said Mrs. Hume, sighing wearily as she bent over the child. "But cheer up, Ailie! If it is really as Big Donald says, relief may be coming at last, and we may be able to get out of this terrible place."

Little groups of people, mostly soldiers, began to gather on the ramparts. Some of them had field-glasses, with which they eagerly scanned the surrounding plains. A very big man in Highland regimentals, with a bagpipe under his arm, was standing in a corner with one hand curved behind his ear, while he raised the other to entreat silence.

For a few moments you might have heard a pin drop, whilst scores of eyes were turned to the piper's face.

"Hearken!" said Big Donald at length. "I hear it; yonder it sounds. I'm no mistaken about it. It's Sir Colin! There's no anither man plays 'The Campbells are comin'' just like yon, save Sir Colin's piper. I'd ken the skirl o' his pipe amangst a thoosand. Thank the Lord, we'll be delivered at the lang last," and Big Donald reverently raised his bonnet as he spoke.

It was, however, quite ten minutes more before any one else could hear the sound which the piper's keen ear had detected; only Mary, Aileen's Scottish nurse, fancied she also could catch a distant sound, but broken and indistinct. The minutes passed.

"Hearken to it noo," said the piper, raising his finger.

And presently the sound became unmistakable. Nearer and nearer it came. It was certainly the bagpipes, for every one could now distinguish the familiar air of "The Campbells are coming;" and surely never sound fell more sweetly on longing ears, for it brought hope of safety and deliverance to

many a heavy heart, to which hope had long been a stranger.

A cheer—an unmistakable British cheer—was raised by the sorely-tried occupants of the Residency, and Big Donald, tuning his own pipes, marched round and round, and played his most inspiriting strains, till every man of the listless garrison woke up to renewed activity. Charlie and Aileen darted off to carry the good news to the sick and wounded, of whom, alas! there were a good many. They were always gladly welcomed in the dreary court and ward in which so much suffering was patiently endured, for the children as well as their mother had been unwearied in attending to the wants and comfort of the invalids; and now their clear, young voices led the faint cheer with which the news was received by the patients.

"There'll be no getting out of this for me," muttered a grey-headed soldier to his next neighbour; "I'm done for, and I knows it. But it'll help me to go easier to my rest to know as the little 'uns—bless

their hearts!—are likely to see old England again."

Poor children! they, too, had uncomplainingly borne their share of discomfort and privation; and Charlie, at any rate, mixing freely with the soldiers as he did, was quite aware how much cause there was for anxiety; and his boyish face, in spite of his unfailing cheerfulness, had grown almost as careworn as those of his elders. His father, Captain Hume, had been one of the first victims of the rebellion, and the widow and children had been on their way to Allahabad, with the intention of proceeding home, when further disturbances had compelled them to remain at Lucknow, under the guardianship of General Havelock and his brave little garrison.

The hope of speedy relief was a little cheering, but the position of the enemy was still a very strong one. The Residency was covered by the fire of three or four outposts, of which the enemy held possession, and these must fall before safety could be relied upon; and it was not until the next day that the relief-party,

which was now plainly visible to the besieged, could commence operations. Charlie spent his time in making excited rushes between the ramparts and the low, dark room, in a corner of which his mother, Aileen, and Mary had established themselves. Each time he brought them some fresh news. "Sir Colin's men are coming on!" he shouted on one occasion. "Listen! The rebels have opened fire upon them from Shâh Nugeet [a mosque] and Tara Kotee [a fortified building]. Mother, do you think Sir Colin knows we are here? And oh! how I wonder if 'Mac' is there, and knows too!"

Mrs. Hume smiled sadly. "Probably Sir Colin will know the names of some of the unfortunates for whose release he is making such gallant efforts," she replied; "but I doubt if such a humble individual as 'Mac,' even if he be with them, would hear."

Now this same "Mac," otherwise Willie M'Leod, was the son of a soldier who had been in Captain Hume's company. He and Charlie were born on the same day, when

the regiment was on service in Canada, and had, consequently, been much together in childhood. "Mac" was now a drummer attached to the 93rd Regiment, and Charlie was full of excitement at the idea of meeting his young playmate again. He was just twelve years old, and was tall and manly for his age, but pale and languid in appearance, as children in India mostly are.

The restless boy could not keep still.

"To think of 'Mac' being one of our deliverers, mother!" he exclaimed—"little 'Mac'! Why, he wasn't nearly as big as me, though the same age, you know. He's awfully plucky though; and if he's really here, I know he'll be one of the first inside these old walls—if only—"

"*If only!*" Ah, Charlie! always that sadly-significant "*if*." His mother knew too well the unspoken fear in her boy's heart, though the words failed on his lips.

The firing around was almost continuous as the day waxed and waned, and the heat with it; but the anxious watchers within the Resi-

dency walls could make out little or nothing of what was going on, on account of the overhanging cloud of smoke, but they feared the British regiments must have suffered severely. The garrison was eager to make a sally, but their general would not consent thus far to weaken his forces on account of the women and children in his charge.

"I know Big Donald wants dreadfully to go out and fight with the rest of the Highlanders, only Mary won't let him," said Aileen, wagging her head wisely.

"Mary! What's Mary got to do with it?" cried Charlie scornfully.

"A great deal. She and Big Donald are *very* particular friends," replied Aileen. "I heard her begging him not to desert us, because she depended on him more than any one else."

"And what did he say?"

"Laughed, and told her she wasn't his commanding officer yet. I couldn't think what he meant. I don't see how Mary is to be his commanding officer *ever;* do you?"

Mrs. Hume smiled to herself as she listened to the children's chatter. She knew well enough that she and the children owed much to Big Donald's devotion to Mary. Knowing that severe fighting was going on so near them, inaction was very hard for the brave men of the Seventy-eighth; but they had to endure it for some days longer—days during which the faces of the officers grew graver and graver and the general's more worn and anxious, for they knew that they were threatened with that greatest of calamities—the failure of the water supply.

One day, when Mrs. Hume and Aileen had, at Charlie's urgent entreaty, come up to the ramparts for a breath of air, Aileen complaining that the continuous noise of firing made her head ache till she felt quite giddy, a shout suddenly arose from below, and some of the officers came running up. "Shâh Nugeet!" was the cry. "They have taken Shâh Nugeet! That is one more hope of deliverance for us."

"Shâh Nugeet! Why, that's yonder huge

place with the dome," exclaimed Mary, who had followed Aileen with a sun-umbrella. "Eh, Maister Chairlie, but Big Donald telt me it's just fu' o' gunpooder. Preserve us a', they'll be blown to bits!"

"Then Sir Colin and his men will all be killed, and then they'll not be able to help us!" cried Aileen, hiding her face in her hands.

"Not they," cried Charlie. "They'll know all about it a deal better than we do; besides, the Ninety-third take a deal of killing. I wish I was with 'Mac.' I know he's there. Look! look!" he continued, dancing wildly about. "The smoke has cleared, and there are people—red jackets—climbing the dome—three men and a boy! Look, mother! Look, Aileen! It's 'Mac;' the little one is a drummer, and it's 'Mac' himself. Hurrah! hurrah! He's sounding the old regimental call. Don't you hear it, Ailie?"

Three soldiers and a smaller red speck had indeed crept up the great, glittering dome of the mosque. They waved aloft the well-known colours of the Ninety-third, with a

feather bonnet hung on the top of the staff, and a distinct bugle call came ringing through the hot air—a signal which was answered by a hearty cheer from the garrison, which must have reached the ears of the victors.

The signalling party were then seen to commence the descent of the dome; but when half-way down, the red speck of a drummer detached himself and crept up again to the top, from whence, holding on to the spire, he waved his bonnet, while once more the cheery bugle notes rang out.

Charlie grew frantic. "'The Cock o' the North,' 'Mac's' favourite tune! Did you hear it?" he shouted. "Now I am sure he knows *we* are here. That was a signal for us alone, on purpose to let us know he is near."

But, unfortunately, the enemy had taken note of the signalling as well as the party at the Residency, for a storm of round-shot was directed against the spot. Charlie's fears for his daring chum overcame his triumph, and he was relieved when the great shining dome again stood tenantless against the sky.

An assault was immediately afterwards made by the British on two more of the rebels' fortified positions, of which the mess-house was one; and taking advantage of this, a daring attempt was made by the enemy to recapture Shâh Nugeet. But this was fortunately seen and frustrated, and before long the eager watchers on the ramparts had the satisfaction of seeing at least three of the rebel strongholds in the hands of the British.

CHAPTER II.

THE RELIEF OF LUCKNOW.

CHARLIE'S letter home was a standing joke in his own little circle; but, nevertheless, his perseverance in the writing of it, under all kinds of difficult circumstances, was much to his credit. He had an elder sister in England, whose health had obliged her to be sent home four or five years previously to the care of an uncle and aunt. The attachment between this sister Marjory and himself had been unusually close, for circumstances had rendered the little boy completely dependent on her love and care; and when the painful parting came, Charlie, who could write fairly well, had promised of his own accord to write to her every day, if only a few words. This

promise, made when he was barely eight years old, he had never failed to keep; and no one but herself could tell how precious to the loving sister had been the boyish, much-crumpled and well-thumbed scrawls which had come to her so regularly by every mail.

She herself had given to him, as a parting gift, the little leather blotting-book, with its ready stamped and addressed envelopes in an inner pocket, which was Charlie's constant companion, and the case itself had become known as "Charlie's letter home."

Charlie was scribbling fast and furiously at his letter on the following morning, when exulting shouts and cheers were heard from the courtyard, mingled with the strains of the regimental band and the shrill scream of Donald's pipes, and Mrs. Hume entered with a flush on her usually pale cheeks, and a light of hope in her eyes, and, folding him in her arms, said,—

"Thank God, Charlie, boy, we may really venture to hope to see Marjory and home again now. Listen to the shouts. Generals

Havelock and Outram are marching out to receive Sir Colin; and the Residency will be formally relieved by him this afternoon."

An hour or two later on that November day every occupant of the Residency not disabled by wounds or sickness was gathered in the courtyard to receive Sir Colin and his men; and Charlie had the supreme happiness of greeting "Mac," who, as he had predicted, was amongst the first to enter the walls; for the reckless drummer who had the second time scaled the dome of Shâh Nugeet was, indeed, no other than Willie M'Leod. He had not escaped altogether scathless. When ordered to come down he had obeyed, sounding "The Cock o' the North" as a greeting to his friends as he did so; but in the act of descending, a stray shot struck his arm and shattered the bone. In spite of this, the plucky little drummer had insisted on marching in with the relieving force, so eager was he to meet again the old playmate whom he knew to be amongst the prisoners in the Residency.

"Mac's" wounded condition rather damped

the joy of the meeting; but Mrs. Hume, who had a warm regard for the widowed mother, now far away in her cottage amongst the Scottish hills, who had so often helped her to nurse and care for her own children in Canada, was glad to take the small hero under her maternal wing and become his nurse.

Up went the Union Jack on the last remaining fort, which had now been taken by the British. It was instantly cut down again by a shot from a body of rebels hovering near, and as instantly replaced. All was military stir and animation as news was exchanged and old friends greeted each other. The lately-imprisoned garrison and their charges allowed themselves for a time to forget their sufferings and anxieties, and revel in a feeling of safety.

For the first time for many months the children that night enjoyed some hours of quiet sleep, unbroken by the alarms and anxieties which had so often disturbed them. Aileen, poor child, had frequently been awakened by fancied terrors, and had lain

trembling and crying for hours afterwards; and so great had been the strain on her nerves that her mother had serious fears that her health would altogether break down.

The safety was, however, only comparative; they were still surrounded by the baffled rebels, who might at any time be reinforced. So the generals, in full council, decided to evacuate the Residency at midnight on November 22, under cover of the darkness, for detached parties of the enemy were ever on the alert to shoot down women and children. The retreat was therefore to be protected by a line of sharp-shooters, and all was to be done as quickly and silently as possible.

These masterly arrangements were carried out without a hitch. The midnight flitting was effected in safety; and before the enemy was aware of their departure, the small party of women, children, sick, and wounded, surrounded by their stout defenders, was encamped in tents in the park of the Dil-Koosha Palace.

The fugitives had, of course, been unable to

encumber themselves with much in the way of baggage. Mary and a faithful native servant had, however, divided some bundles of necessaries between them; and the small sleeping tents were made as comfortable as circumstances would permit, Mrs. Hume, Aileen, and Mary occupying one tent, whilst Charlie and "Mac," under the charge of Big Donald, were domiciled in another, together with a small, grey monkey belonging to Aileen and deeply attached to her, who was, at least in his own estimation, an important member of the company.

Pry was a gentle, merry little animal, and had lightened many an otherwise weary hour for the children during their captivity by his comical pranks and jealous affection. He now extended to "Mac" a large share of the latter; and whenever the wounded arm was dressed, he would hold tightly to the skirt of Mrs. Hume's gown, from the shelter of which he gazed first at her and then at "Mac," and lastly at the wounded limb, with a droll expression of perplexity and concern on his

little black countenance that sent both patient and nurse into shouts of laughter.

Pry was, however, in disgrace on this first night. In the hurry of the start his mistress had forgotten to bring away the biscuits in which he delighted; but it appeared his sharp eyes had spied out a tin box, resembling that in which they were kept, in the kit of a certain soldier, and believing it to be his own property, he was attempting to make off with it when caught in the act by the indignant owner.

Big Donald had much ado to rescue the thief from the soldier's wrathful hands, which had already bestowed upon him sundry hearty cuffs; and the poor little beastie, broken-hearted by his punishment and the fancied loss of his favourite dainty, sat in a corner of the boys' tent, hiding his face in his tiny black paws, with piteous cries and moans. Finally Mary was obliged to fetch Aileen to console and carry him off to her own domicile, where, curled up at his mistress's side, he soon sobbed himself to sleep like a scolded child.

Many a long day of forced marching followed

for our friends; but in spite of sufferings from heat, fatigue, and various privations, the children enjoyed it. To them it appeared a perpetual picnic, and freedom from anxiety and the open-air life soon restored their health and spirits. Most frequently the whole party walked, but now and then one or other of them got a lift on a dooly or a baggage-pony.

Riding a pony was a great delight to Charlie, and led to an escapade on his part which might have ended disastrously for himself. He was mounted on this occasion on a strong but obstinate little animal, on which, for its sins, the soldiers had bestowed the appropriate name of "Mule." Now Mule resented any attempt to manage him, except from the soldier who took care of him, and to whom he had attached himself so devotedly that he would follow him about like a dog. Charlie had long been bent on trying his own method of management on Mule; and taking advantage of a dark night (for, in order to avoid the heat, the little party marched for an hour or two after sunset to make up for the enforced rest during

the hottest part of the day), he dropped to the rear and mounted Mule. According to his wont, the pony immediately stopped, and no power that his rider could bring to bear upon him would induce him to proceed. Charlie patted and coaxed and whispered in his ears, and finally dismounted and tried to drag his self-willed little steed along by the bridle. But Mule planted his stout little fore-legs in the sand and refused to budge an inch.

The party in front were already lost in the darkness, and Charlie, courageous as he was, began to repent of his exploit. He was quite aware of the danger of the situation in which he had placed himself. He knew he might easily get lost, or fall into the hands of one or other of the small bodies of rebels which constantly harassed the march; and he was seriously thinking of running on and leaving Mule to take care of himself, when a long, shrill whistle met his ear.

"That's Big Donald," he said to himself joyfully. He answered the signal in the same manner, and the tall figure of the piper loomed

out of the darkness the next minute, followed by Scott, Mule's attendant, who had missed the baggage-pony, and knowing of Charlie's desire to ride him, guessed what had become of the pair.

"Hoots, but ye were unco misguidit to dae sic a thing as this, Maister Chairlie," grumbled Big Donald as he came up. "Ye might hae brought sair trouble on us a' by sic unconseederate conduc'; as it is, there's madam wringin' her hands, an' Mary, puir soul, greetin' fine ower the loss o' ye."

"Well, well, Donald, you needn't grumble so at a fellow. I only wanted to try to manage Mule like that horse-tamer I told you my sister wrote about. How should I know the little brute would be so obstinate? I thought *any* pony could be managed that way."

"Nae doot, nae doot, Maister Chairlie," returned the piper dryly; "but it isna ilka ane has the gift. Hooever, laddies maun aye learn by experience, but at sic a time as this experience might be bought too dear. I'd advise ye, sir, to bide a wee, an' exerceese yer

talent for horse-tamin' at a mair convenient period."

A light cut of the whip from Scott had sent Mule off at full speed; and all the time he spoke Big Donald was hurrying Charlie onwards with swift strides, so that it was only a minute or two before they rejoined the main body, which had halted to let them come up. The would-be horse-tamer felt sincerely penitent for his foolhardy action when he became aware of the state of alarm into which he had thrown his mother. He had interrupted the entire order of march, for which he received a sharp reprimand from the officer in command, to say nothing of being obliged to run the gauntlet of all the jokes and covert allusions to mules and horse-breaking, to which, for the remainder of the march, officers and men alike subjected him.

A few days afterwards, just a fortnight after the party had left Lucknow, they arrived safely at Allahabad. Here Mrs. Hume decided to remain for a week or so, in order that she might rest and make necessary prepara-

tions for the voyage home, she and the children being almost destitute with regard to clothes. Meanwhile they revelled in the luxuries of baths and clean linen, of which they had so long been deprived. Even the civilized appointments of the table and sleeping-rooms had become so novel that their reappearance was a source of keen pleasure to the children.

In a month or two, to Charlie's great joy, the Ninety-third were to follow them to England, and this meant reunion with "Mac," whose arm was so nearly well that he was able to resume his post in the band. But the first thing to be done was to conclude his letter home with intelligence of their safety, and the happy news that they were so soon to be really on the way to England and Marjory. Charlie and Aileen themselves carefully posted the packet, with its rubbed and shabby stamp—made yet more bulky by an enclosure from his mother—which had already travelled so far, and accompanied its writer through so many dangers and adventures.

CHAPTER III.

THE LOST LETTER.

"LOSS of a P. and O. steamer," murmured a fine-looking elderly man, who had just unfolded his *Times* at the breakfast-table. "Dear me, I hope— Why, Marjory, my dear child—" A girl jumped up from her seat behind the coffee cups and came towards him, her very lips paling as she did so. "How foolish of me, to be sure!" went on the gentleman. "There! read for yourself, Marjory. It is all right, you see, even if our dear people *were* on board this boat. No lives are lost; passengers, mails, and even baggage, are safely transferred to the *Dolphin*, bound for Southampton. It only means the delay of a few hours, either in their own arrival or in that of

letters; so cheer up, Marjory, and forgive your old uncle for giving you such a fright," and Mr. Balfour bestowed a kiss on his niece, who was now eagerly scanning the newspaper.

Marjory rapidly regained her composure, and answered him with an affectionate smile.

"I was frightened for a moment," she said; "suspense has made me nervous. They have been through so much, you know, have encountered so many perils, that it really seems too good to be true that we shall meet again at last. I am always fearing something fresh will happen to prevent it. But look here, uncle. Lower down is a notice of the arrival of the *Dolphin* at Southampton; so, as they have not already telegraphed, they cannot have come."

"No; and there will surely be letters by the mid-day post."

"Don't forget you have promised me the next Indian stamp, Marjory," put in a boy of fourteen, looking up from the book beside his plate. "I am the only one who has not got one of Charlie's stamps, and it will just complete my collection."

"You shall have it, Kenneth," returned Marjory. "Only think—this will most likely be the last, the *very* last, of Charlie's letters home. Dear, darling Charlie! how faithfully he has kept his promise! I have every one of the letters he has written to me, from the first childish round hand to the last pencil scrawl written after they left Lucknow."

"Lucky chap," remarked Kenneth; "I wish I had been in his shoes. Why, he's been helping to make history ever so fast lately, and I don't believe he even knows it."

Marjory smiled as she moved restlessly about the room, attending to the wants of her uncle and cousin. She was too much excited to sit still and eat her own breakfast.

Presently a girl of twelve and a still younger boy came into the room.

"I say, Mag," said the boy, putting half a dozen books which he carried under his arm into his cousin's lap, "Miss Walters wants you to cover these library books, and then Nell and I will take them back. They'll be wanted for Sunday, you know."

"Very well, Hugh. Put them down in the garden-room, please; I will do them presently," answered Marjory, glad to have something to which she must give her attention to while away the time before the mid-day post.

Marjory Hume had taken the place of eldest daughter in her uncle's house ever since the death of her dearly-loved aunt—an elder sister of her mother's—some two years before; and Mr. Balfour was thinking rather ruefully that the time was approaching when he would have to give her up to the still closer claims of her own family. How much he would miss her bright presence and loving attentions no one but himself knew, for she had truly been the sunshine of his home; whilst had she been really the mother-sister she appeared to be, she could not have received warmer affection than that lavished on her by her young cousins. She went about the house on this particular morning performing her usual duties as in a dream, and was seated in the sunny garden-room, which her uncle allowed her to consider as her own,

putting the last of the books into its brown paper cover, when Kenneth rushed in, waving a letter triumphantly over his head.

"Hurrah! here it is, Marjory!" he shouted. "Charlie's letter, as large as life, and such a fat one, too, with the stamp surcharged. Allahabad!—that proves they're safe, anyhow. I say, Mag," went on Kenneth, as his cousin, her cheeks rosy with excitement, began to tear open the letter, "take care not to spoil the stamp, please. It'll be quite a historically interesting one, you know, especially after being shipwrecked to finish up with."

But Marjory was too deep in her letter to hear or heed Kenneth's chatter, and finding he had no chance of obtaining the coveted stamp at that moment, he dawdled out of the room. Reading the soiled and crumpled sheets, which had been scrawled with odds and ends of pencil under such difficulties, was slow work. Marjory had just spelled through the first page, and glanced at her mother's note to satisfy herself that her dear

ones were indeed in safety, when Hugh and Nell rushed clamorously in.

"Hallo, Mag! where are those books?" began Hugh; and Nell added more sedately, "If you please, Marjory, Miss Walters thinks it is going to rain before long; so, if the books are ready, we are going to take them now."

"There is only one to finish," replied Marjory; and seeing that the only way to get rid of the children was to complete her work at once, she replaced the precious letters in their envelope, and fastened down the cover of the remaining book; whilst her restless young cousins, who did not often get a chance to rummage amongst her treasures, occupied their eyes and fingers with poking into everything they could lay hands upon.

"There," she said at length, gathering up the books, and putting them into Hugh's arms—"there they are, Hughie; don't let them fall in the mud as you did before."

Marjory accompanied the children into the hall, where Miss Walters joined them, and stood for a minute or two relating her news

to the sympathetic governess; and on returning to her sanctum, went straight to the work-table by the fireplace on which she believed she had placed the Indian letter. But it was not there; neither could she find it on the larger table at which she had been covering the books. "I'm sure I put it here," murmured Marjory, hurriedly turning over her working materials; but turn over as she might, and search high and low as she did, she could find no trace of the missing packet.

Kenneth, strolling in again with an eye to the promised stamp, assisted her, sprawling his long length on the floor to look under bookcase and fender; but all in vain.

"What an unaccountable thing!" said Marjory, with tears in her eyes. "Dear Charlie's letter, and mother's too! O Ken! I had only read one page, it was so faintly written, and peeped at mother's just to see if all were well, when the children came in for the books. I don't even know when they are starting home, or anything."

"Could Hugh have meddled with it? He

may have been attracted by the foreign stamp."

"I am sure he did not. I laid it here on this little table, and the children were looking into the books and boxes on the big one where I was working; they never came round to this corner."

"Well, it's very odd. Can it have got into the fire? It's a pretty hot one."

"That's the only thing I can think of, Ken. The fire *was* a hot one—too hot and big for this mild morning; so I opened a bit of the window."

"And the youngsters left the door open, I suppose?"

"No—that is—yes; but I made Hugh shut it at once. Stay! I left the door open myself whilst I spoke to Miss Walters in the hall. It might have blown into the fire then; but still it was such a thick packet, and I was only away a minute or two. Can it have been so completely burnt as to leave no trace in so short a time?"

"I don't see how it could; but it must have

been, you know," replied Kenneth, taking up the poker and carefully examining amongst the coals and under the grate. "Not a trace of it, as you say. But you might not have noticed the fire on first missing the letter, and there's nowhere else it *can* have gone. I'm awfully sorry for you, Mag, and for myself too," added Kenneth, as he remembered the Indian stamp which seemed lost to him.

Poor Marjory! the tears would fill her eyes all that day at the thought of her lost treasure. She and Kenneth, and her uncle himself, on his return home, kept going to the garden-room and renewing the hopeless search, as people will under such circumstances. The loss was very tantalizing, deeply anxious as they all were to get the news of the absent ones. The children were questioned. But they had seen no letter, they said—didn't even know there had been one; and Hugh insisted on going out and carefully searching the garden and nearest bit of road as long as a gleam of daylight lasted, in spite of Kenneth's assurance that, from the set of the wind, which was

blowing directly *in* at the window, a letter could not have blown *out*. It was not till late in the evening that the search was reluctantly given up.

"You must be content with knowing they are safe and well," said her uncle, as Marjory bade him good-night. "At any rate you found out that."

"Yes, uncle; and they cannot now arrive for at least another week. But it is hard to lose all that mother and Charlie have written with such constant thought of me," and the tears of disappointment once more filled Marjory's eyes.

"Poor little girl!" said her uncle tenderly; "but you will be hearing it all from their own lips before very long. Meanwhile, spare nothing in making ready for them; of course they will come straight here. Which room will your mother like best?"

"The one opposite mine, I think, uncle. Aileen could have a little bed in the alcove, and there's the dressing-room for Mary—good old Mary! I wonder if she will recog-

nize me. By the way, from what mother has hinted at in former letters, I should not be surprised to hear that Mary leaves her heart in India, in the keeping of that 'Big Donald' Charlie talks so much about."

Mr. Balfour smiled.

"And what are you going to do with Charlie?"

"Oh, Ken has begged to have Charlie up in the barrack. He says they can have more fun and spin such splendid yarns up there. I suppose you don't mind, uncle?"

"Mind! Not I. Only make them comfortable; that's all I think of. Now no more tears, my little girl; go to sleep and dream of the happy meeting in store for you."

It was a big, pleasant suburban house in the midst of a large garden in which Mr. Balfour lived. The busy barrister could not find time to travel far afield, but he liked, as he said, to sleep in the fresh air; so he daily rode or drove to and from his rooms in town, and heartily enjoyed the hours, few and far between, that he was able to spend in gratify-

ing what he called his rural tastes. Few real country houses could have been more spacious and comfortable, or have boasted more beautiful grounds, than the home that was being so hospitably prepared to receive the expected travellers.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ARRIVAL.

THE days dragged by. They seemed to Marjory the longest she had ever spent; but her restless excitement found an outlet in all manner of loving care for the comfort of the dear ones she so anxiously expected. Nell was full of some mysterious doings of Kenneth and Hugh in the rabbit-warren of attics, where the boys had their sleeping-quarters, called "the barrack."

"Ken and Hughie are always carrying things up to the barrack," Nell complained in an aggrieved tone, "and they hammer, and talk, and laugh. It's for Charlie, I know; but they won't let me or even Miss Walters in, or tell us what they are doing."

Marjory laughed. "Never mind, Nell dear; I know nothing about it either, except that the boys are planning some surprise for Charlie. We shall know in good time. You and I have other things to do. Come with me and help me to put the finishing touches to Aileen's bed."

The prettiest of bowers had been prepared for the little sister—quite a nice little room within a room; for the guest-chamber, which was to be occupied by Mrs. Hume, had lately been added to in a quaint and somewhat irregular fashion by having a bit built out on to the roof of the billiard-room, which was also a recent addition to the house. It had a wide window all to itself, with a beautiful view over the garden and heath beyond, and was a step higher than the rest of the room—a sort of platform, in fact. A curtain had been arranged by which this alcove could be shut off at will, and it made what Nell called "quite a little doll's-house" bed-room for Aileen.

The prettiest of brass bedsteads had been

put into it, and Mr. Balfour had himself chosen and brought from town a brightly-flowered eider-down quilt. Besides the bed, there was just room for a low wicker chair, a small table, and a large bath. Nell examined everything with warm interest and admiration, questioning Marjory meanwhile for the hundredth time as to what Aileen was like, and trying to picture to herself how the fair, curly head which her cousin described would look, as she patted the frilled pillows where it was so soon to rest. She was made quite happy by being allowed to place a pretty little sculptured angel of her own, which she greatly prized, on a bracket at the bed's head, where she thought Aileen would like to see it.

At last came the happy morning when the telegraph boy was seen coming up the drive.

"It's always been a marvel to me that telegraph boys are so much like other people," Hugh once remarked. "They carry about wonderful and tremendous bits of news in those yellow envelopes of theirs that often upset a whole houseful of people, and they

walk along as cool as you like, and never seem the least bit excited."

"You would scarcely be surprised to see them walking on their heads—eh, Hugh?" laughed Kenneth.

This particular boy handed in his yellow envelope, which contained such great news, and marched off, kicking the stones of the gravel before him with an indifferent whistle, while every one in the house gathered from various quarters into the hall as Marjory's trembling fingers tore open the momentous telegram.

"From Southampton—from mother!" she cried. "It is all right. They are coming! they are coming! O uncle, what time can they arrive?" and she placed the paper in Mr. Balfour's hand.

A group of heads crowded over the railway guide. "Put on your hat, Marjory," said Mr. Balfour.—"Order the carriage round at once, Ken. If we are smart, we can just catch the earliest train at Waterloo by which they can possibly arrive. No, no!" he said, as the children burst into a unanimous request to

go also. "I can only take Marjory; we want all the room.—Hurry up, Marjory."

In less than ten minutes uncle and niece were on their way to the station, and before Marjory was able to realize that the long-anticipated meeting was indeed so near at hand, she was clasped in her mother's arms. But could this mother, with such a pale, worn face under a widow's cap, be the same sweet, youthful one she had left at her father's side only four or five years before? thought Marjory sadly. It was not till then that she realized what her mother must have undergone to have worked such a change. And the tall, shy youth, whose head was on a level with her own—how unlike the little golden-haired Charlie, who had lived so faithfully in her remembrance! She could scarcely recognize him, even though she held his hand so closely in her own. Aileen gazed open-eyed at the grown-up sister, of whom she had no recollection at all, but who looked at her so lovingly.

Most people have experienced the mingled

joy and embarrassment of such meetings, and know how the full happiness and the satisfaction do not come till later, when the strangeness has worn off, and the long-parted ones have had time to discover that the real persons they know and love are just the same in spite of the difference in outward aspect.

They had all become more at ease with each other when the party drove up to the door of Heathside, as Mr. Balfour's house was called. Here there were more greetings to be encountered from the shy but eager cousins who were awaiting them; and it was not till these were over, and the whole party gathered at a late luncheon, that Marjory remembered the lost letter, and Mrs. Hume and Charlie were made aware how little was actually known by the home people of their personal share in the late events in India—nothing, indeed, but the bare fact of their having reached Lucknow, and what could be gathered from the newspapers of the relief of that place, and the subsequent escape of the occupants of the Residency to Allahabad.

Something of what we already know came out in the agitated, discursive talk that followed; but Mrs. Hume and Charlie were in no hurry to tell, or the others to hear, painful details at the present moment. These would "keep," as Kenneth observed; and he promised himself many a stirring tale out of his cousin, when he and Hugh should have got him to themselves in the barrack.

The tired travellers had to be installed in their apartments; and after Marjory's thoughtful preparations had been duly inspected and admired, "Kenneth's surprise," as Nell called it, came out. It appeared—no one knew why, neither could he himself explain—that he had taken it into his head to consider Charlie in the character of a military hero, and prepared for his reception accordingly. He had therefore removed the ordinary window and bed curtains of the room destined for his cousin's use, and replaced them by fanciful draperies of flags of all kinds, whilst the walls were adorned with the various weapons which the boys had managed to beg, borrow, or buy,

arranged in fantastic devices. A fancy picture of the relief of Lucknow, cut from an old number of an illustrated paper, hung over the fireplace, surrounded by a wreath of laurel. Shouts of laughter, and the astonished exclamations of Charlie and the children, brought up Mr. Balfour and the elders of the party; and Kenneth's ingenious handiwork had at least the good effect of rubbing off all remaining strangeness and constraint among the cousins, and setting them completely at their ease.

Marjory and Mary had discovered that neither was much altered. Mary, indeed, was less changed than any of them; and she on her part declared that, beyond having "grown out of knowledge," her dear Miss Marjory was just the same sweet young lady she had always been. It only needed the nursery tea, which she presently enjoyed with Nell and her own Miss Aileen, to make her feel she was really safe in old England, and could look forward to leading a civilized and respectable life again—a source of deep satisfaction to her simple mind. If she could

only know, thought Mary, that a certain tall piper of the Seventy-eighth, whom she had left so far away, was likewise in safety, she would have nothing left to wish for. Meanwhile, she felt herself quite a heroine, as she sat pouring into the wondering ears of Nell's nurse and sundry other maids some of her most thrilling experiences, after Aileen was safely tucked into her little bed in the alcove. The boys chatted themselves into familiarity and good fellowship in the barrack; and Mrs. Hume and Marjory, too happy and weary to talk, were content to sit a while by the fireside silently clasping each other's hands before retiring to rest.

On the following day there were Indian treasures to unpack, for the native servant who had travelled with his mistress all the way from Lucknow arrived with the remainder of the baggage, and *Pry*—yes, actually Pry! Here was a new and unexpected delight for the young cousins, especially for Hugh—to have a real live monkey in the house, and an Indian servant to boot! Could anything be more novel and charming?

"It was really best of all," Hugh decided with a deep-drawn sigh of happiness, which highly amused his father and aunt.

Later in the day the whole family, young and old, were gathered in the drawing-room, chatting cosily in the firelight, when a servant entered and announced to Marjory that a girl belonging to her Sunday-school class wished to speak to her, and refused to go away till she had done so.

"It's Mrs. West's Polly from the laundry, Miss Marjory, and she's a-crying so, I can't get nothing but tears out of her," observed the smart parlour-maid.

Marjory went into the hall at once, and the moment she appeared, a girl of about fourteen hurried towards her with a nervous catch of her breath.

"Please, Miss Hume, doesn't this belong to you?" she said, pushing a dirty, much-crumpled packet into Marjory's hand, which, with an exclamation of astonishment, the latter recognized as her lost Indian letter.

CHAPTER V.

THE STOLEN STAMP.

MARJORY was regarding the letter in her hand with an expression of blank amazement, and the girl standing in front of her had burst into tears, when Kenneth, who had followed his cousin into the hall, looked over her shoulders.

"Your lost letter, Marjory!" he exclaimed. "By all that is mysterious, Charlie's letter home! Why, this is a pretty piece of work. —I say, young woman, can't you stop this water-cart business, and let us know what it means? And oh! you thief of the world, where's the stamp?"

"Hush, Ken!" said Marjory, laying her hand on his arm; "you are only frightening

her.—Come now, Polly; no one is going to hurt you. Try and stop crying, and tell me where you found this letter."

"It were inside a liberry book, miss, stuck to the cover—a liberry book as my sister Susie took out a week ago."

"One of the books you covered, Mag! It must have slipped inside. How was it we never thought of that?" cried Ken.

"Why did you not give me back the letter sooner, Polly? I saw you and Susie at school on Sunday. And what has become of the Indian stamp that was on it?"

"It were all along of that stamp, miss!" burst out Polly; "but I were not to say no more than that. Susie's a-dying, miss, and she goes on orful about wanting to see you afore she goes, to tell you what she's done," and Polly crammed a corner of her pinafore into her mouth to stifle her sobs.

"Susie dying! Why, Polly, what can you mean? She was quite well on Sunday.—Will you bring me some water, Ken?" said Marjory, taking the girl's hands and placing her in a

seat.—"Now, Polly, drink this, and do try and explain yourself."

"It were an accident, miss. A cart knocked her down this morning in the fog, and it were all along of that stamp. She's orful bad, miss, and nothing will pacify her 'cept seeing you; so mother she sent me to ask if you'll come."

"Of course I will come at once, Polly. Poor little Susie! I hope it is not so bad as you think.—Will you go and tell them in the drawing-room, Kenneth, whilst I get ready?"

When Marjory reappeared, several of the young people were surrounding and questioning the girl; but, as the maid had stated, "nothing could be got out of her but tears." Kenneth had his overcoat on, and was prepared to accompany his cousin, determined, as he said, to see the mysterious affair to an end.

The three started at a quick walk towards Orchard's Lane, where the laundress lived, and less than ten minutes brought them to an enclosed yard, in which stood the skeletons of some ancient apple-trees. Avenues of newly-

washed sheets and table-cloths were flapping in a ghostly manner in the windy twilight, and Polly piloted them through one of these to a green door, and ushered them straight into a good-sized room, where a sad scene met Marjory's eyes.

Two women, talking loudly and excitedly, were bending over a cushioned settle at one side of the room, on which lay the form of a little girl. The greater part of the room was taken up by a mangle and an ironing-table. One of the women, whom Marjory recognized as Mrs. West, the Heathside laundress, was holding the head of the moaning child on her arm.

"It's right down good of you to come, Miss Hume," she said in a strangled voice, "but I fear you are too late; she's been a-crying and a-crying for you till my heart was broke to hear her. She said as she'd took something as was yours; but she's onconscious now, and a-going fast."

"Have you sent for the doctor? Where is she hurt?"

"I think it's her side, miss, and her head; but she wouldn't be touched. The doctor was out, and has not seen her yet."

"Doctors won't do her no good; she'll never speak no more, pore lamb," put in the other woman, a voluble Irish charwoman. "Any one can see she's a-going. The hivins be her bed!"

"Will you run round for Dr. Hay, Kenneth?" said Marjory in a low voice. "I don't think the case is so hopeless as they say; but we can do nothing till a doctor has seen her."

Kenneth rushed off, and in a few minutes returned with Dr. Hay, whom he had luckily caught just entering his own door.

"What's this I hear? What's wrong, Miss Hume?" questioned the cheery doctor, bustling in. "An accident to my little friend Susie!—Where's she hurt, Mrs. West?"

"That's what we can't tell, sir. She's screamed whenever any one offered to touch her, ever since the driver of the wagon that knocked her down carried her in and laid her

down just as she is. She'd the sense to tell him where she lived."

"We must get her to bed and out of this racket before I can do anything. Her limbs are all right, and I can't find much amiss with her head," said the doctor, who had been passing his hands gently over the little form on the settle.—"Kenneth, my boy, do you mind giving me a helping hand to carry her upstairs?"

Carefully lifting the cushions on which the child lay, the doctor and Kenneth carried her up the steep little staircase to the bed in a tidy room which she shared with Polly.

"There's no need for all these tears, Mrs. West," said the doctor; "she's not as bad as she looks. Just go down and make yourself a cup of tea; Miss Hume will help me to get Susie into bed."

As soon as this was done, Dr. Hay made a careful examination.

"Well, here's a rib or two broken," he said, looking up, "and there seems to be slight concussion of the brain. We'll soon patch her

up and pull her through. Please, tell the mother, Miss Hume, Susie's not going to die yet. No, don't bring her up—she's no good; but if you'll come back for a few minutes yourself, we'll soon have the child comfortable. She'll feel nothing, you know, so don't be frightened. It may be rather a tedious case," went on the doctor, when he had finished his bandaging and placed his patient in the right position, "but all depends on her being kept perfectly quiet now. Can you wait a few minutes while I send the nurse round? I'll give that hysterical, good woman a talking to as I go out, or she'll have half the parish in gossiping."

Marjory gladly consented to wait; and as soon as the doctor had gone, Polly crept up, still with her pinafore in her mouth, and cast an awe-struck glance at the bandaged and insensible little form on the bed.

"Now, Polly," said Marjory in a low tone, "I want you to be a sensible girl, as I know you *can* be. Poor little Susie will soon be well again, if you will only help to keep her

quiet now. There is nothing for you to cry about in this dreadful manner. Will you try and do as I tell you?"

"Yes, Miss Marjory."

"Well, then, wash that poor face of yours; it would frighten Susie if she were to see it. Then go down and have your tea. Afterwards I want you to light a fire here while I put the room straight. But remember the house *must* be kept quiet."

Polly gulped down a final sob, and did as she was bid. Susie had ceased moaning, and now lay quiet and pale. She was still unconscious, but the little room was looking cosy and bright when the nurse arrived and relieved Marjory of her charge.

Kenneth had been waiting for her downstairs, and had vainly tried to get anything like a connected account of the accident or its cause from Mrs. West.

"Good old boy!" said Marjory, gratefully squeezing his arm as they started homewards. "I'm sorry to have caused you such an uncomfortable time, but what a mercy things

have turned out so much better than we feared!"

"The little one looked pretty bad. I felt rather queer when I saw her," returned Kenneth. "No wonder they were frightened. I tried to gather some facts from Mrs. West, but all she can tell is that the child went out in the fog—no one knows why or where—and was knocked down by a cart or van. But what it all has to do with the Indian stamp is more than I can imagine."

It was three or four days before Susie herself was able to unravel the mystery. Marjory went each day to see her little scholar, whom Dr. Hay and the nurse reported to be going on quite as well as could be hoped. On the fourth day, however, the nurse said, "I think it will be well for you to have a little talk with the child, if you'll be so kind, Miss Hume. She ought not, by rights, to talk yet; but she's evidently got something on her mind that she wants to tell you, and the doctor says it will be the least of two evils to let her have her way."

Marjory assented, and entering the room with a cheery greeting, seated herself by Susie's bed, and kindly kissed the wistful little face on the pillow.

"Oh! thank you, miss. Then you do forgive me?" said the child with a look of relief.

"Why, of course I do, Susie, though I don't know what it is I am to forgive. Now, suppose you eat up this nice jelly I have brought you, and then you shall tell me what is troubling this poor little head of yours."

"It were all along of that stamp on your letter, miss," began Susie in a weak voice, when she had obediently eaten the jelly. "I found the letter in a liberry book, sticking to the inside of the cover, and I knew it was yours. I meant to bring it to you d'rectly, but I showed it to Emily Potts, as lives at the newspaper shop, because of the stamp, which looked curious-like; and Emily she looked at it, and says it's worth a lot of money, as Potts sells forrin stamps himself, and so she knew. Then Emily she persuades me to go home along with her and show it to Potts.

Well, miss, d'rectly Potts sees it, he says as how he'd give me two shillings for it. I didn't like to, miss, but he says as how it were truthfully mine, as I found it—on his word and honour, he says. So I let him tear the stamp off, and he give me the two shillings."

"O Susie! haven't you learned your Sunday-school lessons better than that?"

"I know, Miss Marjory; I knowed then as it was wrong, but I wanted the money real bad, to buy a new ribbon for my Sunday hat. I saw a lovely ribbon at the shop, and Em'ly she told me I could buy it with the money. So we went straight off to the shop and bought it. And, if you'll b'lieve me, miss, I've never had a happy minute since. I couldn't wear the ribbon, 'cause I couldn't tell mother how I got it; and I couldn't give you back the letter without the stamp, though Em'ly Potts she said I could just say as I'd picked it up like that. So I kept it. But I got more and more unhappy; and at last I made up my mind to go to Potts and get back the stamp, if the shopman would take

the ribbon back, and give me the money instead. And I was on my way to Potts that very morning when the cart knocked me down. It were that foggy, miss, I couldn't see nothing; it came upon me all of a minute. I *was* a-going to tell you truthfully all about it, soon as I'd got the stamp back, Miss Marjory."

"I feel sure you were, my poor little girl."

"And you're sure you forgive me, Miss Marjory?"

"Indeed I do, Susie. You know how wrongly you were acting as well as I can tell you, and oh, how terribly you have been punished!" And Marjory laid her cheek against the child's as she whispered, "Have you asked God to forgive you, Susie?"

"I felt as if I couldn't and didn't ought to till I'd told you, Miss Marjory; but I can now," returned the little girl with a tired sigh.

"That's right, Susie. Now you must give your mind to getting well; and when Dr. Hay will let me, I shall bring my brother Charlie to see you. It was he who wrote the letter in

India. Has Potts still got the stamp, do you think?"

"Yes, miss, unless he's sold it."

"I daresay we can get it back. It is really a valuable one; and I had promised it to my cousin, who has a large book full of foreign stamps."

CHAPTER VI.

CONCLUSION.

MR. BALFOUR was so indignant at the unprincipled conduct displayed by Potts and his daughter in their dealings with Susie West that he forbade Marjory or any member of his household to have anything further to do with so scandalous an affair, and expressed his intention of calling at the newspaper shop himself, accompanied by a police officer, though he was doubtful if the man had actually put himself into the power of the law; but, at any rate, he should hear the opinion of the public on the transaction. He promised Kenneth, moreover, to insist on the stamp being traced, and, if possible, recovered.

Meanwhile the tragic story of the poor

little victim excited the warmest interest and sympathy. Indeed, the little girl was in some danger of being spoiled by the family at Heathside, who each and all visited her as she became well enough to receive visitors, from Mr. Balfour himself down to Aileen; and the servants were always anxious to find an excuse for an errand to Orchard's Lane and a gossip with the laundress.

The letter which had been so long in her keeping, and which, it appeared, had never been removed from its envelope, was read to Susie by Marjory herself; and Charlie even managed one afternoon to smuggle Pry into Susie's room, carrying him snugly hidden under his overcoat; and the little animal, which was certainly not troubled by any shyness, was amiable enough to play all manner of droll tricks, to the mingled terror and delight of Mrs. West and her daughters.

"You don't mean to say he don't wear no clothes, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. West, "when the young ladies could dress him up so beautiful too. All the monkeys as I ever see is

dressed wonderful—I mean them as goes about with the organ-men, sir."

"You'd better try, Mrs. West," replied Charlie gravely. "It might amuse Susie to see him dressed."

After a little whispering with Polly, some old dolls' garments were produced; and Pry, with an aspect of unspeakable sadness and meekness, allowed Charlie to array him therein, holding out his arms as if he were quite accustomed to the process, but with a twinkle in his eyes which was perfectly understood by his master. When he was dressed Pry perched himself in front of a small toilet-glass, and indulged in a few grimaces at his own expense. He then suddenly sprang on to the curtain-pole, and having divested himself of first one garment and then another, he proceeded to tear them into shreds and pelt the onlookers therewith, chattering and gesticulating derisively all the time.

"There, Mrs. West," said Charlie; "you see Indian monkeys prefer to go without clothes. That is what Pry always does. My little

sister has dressed him up many a time, just for the fun of watching the result."

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Mrs. West, wiping the merry tears from her eyes. "It do beat everything to see him; but it's just as well they don't bring more of such a heathen sort of beast to a decent and Christian land like England. I suppose, now, them as I see going about with the organ-men, wearing respectable clothes, was all born in England, sir. That *do* make a difference, to be sure." And Charlie laughingly agreed that in some cases it certainly did.

Susie's chief interest, however, centered in "Mac." She never wearied of hearing about him; and when one day Charlie and Aileen ran in to say that the 93rd and 78th Regiments, with Big Donald and "Mac" and all their friends, were actually on the way home, and that Susie might shortly have the happiness of beholding the little drummer with her own eyes, her excitement knew no bounds.

The exposure of the stamp transaction

brought about such disagreeable results for Mr. Potts that he found it advisable to remove himself and his daughter elsewhere. The air of his present locality did not agree with him, he told his friends. But before he departed the stamp was traced, recovered, and presented to Kenneth by Marjory. Quite an impressive ceremony took place when it was at length installed in its place in the stamp album, and Kenneth himself duly recorded its history, in his best copperplate handwriting, in an elaborate footnote, which ran as follows :—

"This stamp was purchased at Cawnpore, at the time of the Indian Mutiny, by Charles Hume. It travelled with him to Lucknow, and from thence, after the relief of the Residency by Sir Colin Campbell, to Allahabad, at which place, attached to a letter to Miss Hume, it was posted to England. The mail steamer conveying the said letter was wrecked off Cardiff, but the mails were saved and transshipped, and in due time landed at Southamp-

ton. The letter was lost soon after its arrival, and the stamp stolen and sold by the person who found it; but it was afterwards recovered, and presented to me by Miss Hume.

"(Signed) KENNETH BALFOUR.
"CHARLES HUME."
(Original purchaser.)

The recovery of the stamp was quickly followed by the arrival of the troops from India; and one never-to-be-forgotten day, when Susie, almost well again, was able to be downstairs, "Mac" was triumphantly escorted to Orchard's Lane by Charlie and Aileen, and introduced to Susie, whose eyes grew round with awe and admiration as she looked at the red-coated little figure of the drummer, and tried to realize the things he had done and endured.

Mary was made happy by the return of Big Donald; and as he and "Mac" obtained leave of absence from their respective regiments just at the time when Mrs. Hume and her family left Heathside to take up their abode

amongst her late husband's kinsfolk in Scotland, the whole party travelled to the north together.

That Mary and her piper were married in due course and lived happy ever after goes without saying. And as the years sped by it happened that Willie M'Leod and Susie West were thrown much together. It has been hinted, therefore, that the history of the stamp will one day be added to, for it was certainly the chief factor in bringing about the first meeting between the youthful pair, who, Kenneth Balfour assures us, will before long be returning to India as man and wife.

TRUSTABLE TOM.

"TAKE good care of your little sister, Tom; remember I trust her to you. And if it rains, don't forget to bring in the boxes of rose leaves and lavender from off the grass, for I've quite a large order for scent packets. I've put your dinner and baby's milk all ready on the shelf."

The neat, sad-faced young widow kissed her little son as she spoke, and then took a last look at the pretty baby sleeping in her cradle. She turned again to gaze fondly at the children as she reached the garden gate, and thought within herself what a pretty picture they made. Tom sat on his little stool in the cottage doorway, beside which stood a group

of glowing hollyhocks. He had a book on his knee, and was softly rocking the cradle with his foot. A straight, flagged path running from the gate to the cottage door divided the trim garden into two portions. On either side of the path was a broad bed of dwarf rose bushes, mostly of the sweet-scented cabbage and moss varieties. In front of the rose bushes were rows of choice pansies, and a little grass plot lay behind each bed. Several large paper boxes, in which rose petals and lavender were spread to dry, occupied the grass plot on one hand, and three or four bee-hives were ranged under the wall on the other. Beneath the windows were some fine lavender bushes.

The industrious young widow made quite a nice little sum of money by selling her honey and little scent packets of the sweet *pot-pourri*, which she manufactured from an old and much-treasured recipe, and the drying of the rose petals and lavender. The latter was Tom's special work. Widow Nelly, as she was called in the neighbourhood, was now on her way to

the nearest town with a fine supply of honey, for which she could always find a ready market, in her basket. A neighbour was passing as she closed her gate.

"Your garden is quite a sight indeed, Nelly!" exclaimed Mrs. Morris. "But, dear me, it will take you hours to get to the town and back, and you're never going to leave the little 'uns alone all that time!"

"I can't help myself," returned Widow Nelly. "Tom does seem but a little lad to be left alone so long with his baby sister. But then, you see, I can trust my Tom."

"Ay, I know he's a lad in a thousand, and hasn't got his name of 'Trustable Tom' for nothing. I only wish my Alec was half as good and useful—but there, boys will be boys! Well, good-bye, Nelly. I'll give an eye to the children if I can find a minute to spare."

The young widow smiled as she started briskly on her walk. If the truth must be told, she had more faith in the good sense and steadiness of her own little son than in the

amount of care the children were likely to get from her good-natured but heedless neighbour.

For some time after her departure all went well at the cottage. Baby awoke, and Tom fed her with milk and amused her as he well knew how. He had gathered a number of roses in full bloom, and pelted her with them before shredding off their petals to add to those in the boxes. The little one crowed and chuckled, highly enjoying the fun, and finally went to sleep again with her tiny hands full of the soft, fragrant things.

There was a rustle in the great chestnut trees at the side of the garden, and it seemed to Tom that he heard little peals of merry laughter, and then the branches seemed to clap their big leaves together like hands, with a soft little chorus of "Bravo, Tom!" and another peal of soft laughter. While he stood looking towards the trees and listening, a boy a year or two older than himself opened the gate and came down the garden path. He was the son of the neighbour to whom his mother had spoken in the morning.

"Hallo, Tom! mooning as usual," cried the visitor. "Come along and have a game in the field to wake you up; the little 'un will come to no harm."

Tom shook his head.

"I can't, Alec; I mustn't leave her."

"Rubbish! She'll be all right, I tell you; and even if your mother bade you stay at home, she won't know whether you did or not."

"Mother did not bid me stay at home," replied Tom; "she knew well enough I should not leave baby."

"Oh, don't come the 'Trustable Tom' dodge over me," cried Alec jeeringly. "I might have known I should get no fun out of a fellow like you. My mother's gone off, too, and left me to keep house, so I just locked the door and came over here. But as you don't seem to want my company, I shall be off again; only let me get a light first, will you? My string's gone out."

Alec went into the cottage, and proceeded to light the end of a long piece of tarred string which he was carrying in his hand at the

bright little fire which Tom had lighted in the grate, that his mother might not have to wait for tea on her return home. Then standing near the door, he began twirling the string round and round, watching the fiery circles made by the lighted end.

"Oh! please take care, Alec," said Tom, as a spark flew off and fell dangerously near to the child's cradle.

Alec laughed.

"I shan't do any harm to your precious babby," he said mockingly. "Upon my word, Tom, I should be ashamed to call myself a boy, stopping at home to take care of a babby and pick rose leaves as you do. You should let your pretty curls grow long and wear a petticoat like a girl."

Alec went on twirling his lighted string whilst he spoke, and Tom was quite glad when, finding he could get no amusement out of his busy little neighbour, the mischievous lad clattered down the flagged path and ran across the field to his own cottage.

"Bravo! bravo, Tom!—bravo! Trustable

Tom!" lisped the chestnut boughs, clapping their green hands again with another rustling peal of laughter as Tom, having gone to shut the gate after Alec, came back along the path. He was sure they said it, and felt a little hurt, for he thought the trees, too, were mocking him. But the little pansy-faces comforted him with loving smiles as he passed them.

As he re-entered the cottage a terrible sight met Tom's eyes. The cradle in which his sleeping sister lay was in flames. A spark from Alec's string had indeed fallen upon it; and standing as it did in the draught of the doorway, the little checked curtain and counterpane, and even the wicker-work itself, were already burning fiercely. The baby had not awoke, so Tom knew she was still unhurt; and without a thought for his own risk, the little fellow plunged his arms through the smoke and flame and lifted her out. He scorched his hands badly in doing so, and the flames singed his hair and eyelashes; but he manfully carried the sleeping child into the garden and laid her on the grass amongst the

rose-leaf boxes. She was quite untouched by the fire, Tom having fortunately wrapped her small red blanket closely round her before placing her in the cradle.

He was only a little boy, and the sight of the blazing cradle frightened and bewildered him as he stood on the threshold. What if it should set the house on fire? he thought. Then his eyes fell on the watering-pots standing under the window, and he became his capable little self again. Catching up the largest pot, he dashed the water over the cradle, and the flames immediately subsided, though the stifling smoke rolling out almost blinded him. But he brought the second pot, which had the rose on, and showered its contents more slowly on the smoking heap till the fire was completely drowned out.

Then poor little Tom had leisure to feel the pain of his burns. The skin of the hand in which he still held the watering-pot was actually sticking to the handle; and when, a few minutes afterwards, his mother opened the gate, Tom was seated on the grass, white

and faint, beside the little red kicking and screaming bundle of flannel, which he was vainly endeavouring to quiet and comfort by talking to it.

"O mother, I'm so glad you've come!" called Tom, as she entered the garden; but he did not jump up and run to meet her as usual. Indeed he felt at that moment so sick and giddy with the pain that he could not rise, and as his wondering mother reached his side he fell back fainting on the grass. Baby had to cry on uncomforted for once, and the widow had to keep her surprise and consternation at the state of matters inside and outside her home to herself, for it was not until our hero had come round again, and his poor, smarting little hands were properly bandaged, that she could inquire into the details of the catastrophe caused by Alec's carelessness. Then baby had to be fed and comforted and put to bed; and Nelly had just commenced to clear away the remains of the burnt cradle from the deluged floor, when Mrs. Morris, having at length remembered her

promise to look in on the children, came up to the door, Alec, having nothing better to do with himself, sauntering at her heels.

"So you're back again, are you, Nelly?" she began. "I promised to give an eye to the children, I know, but I've been having tea down at mother's, and—but, dear me, Nelly, what on earth has happened? What a mess your place is in! I suppose that boy of yours has been getting into mischief for once?"

This was rather too much for Nelly, brimming over as she was with sorrow for and pride in her little boy. So, with less than her usual gentleness of manner, she briefly stated the real facts of the case, and Mrs. Morris became angry in her turn.

"Well, I'm sure," she said, "you do surprise me, putting the blame on my Alec, that's as innocent as the babe itself, just because your Master Good-child there has been having a bit of mischief all to himself, as boys will.—Here, Alec," she continued, seizing her dismayed and reluctant son by the shoulders

and pushing him forward, "why don't you speak up for yourself, and say as you've not been near the place?"

"Because I have been here, mother," returned the boy sullenly. "If the cradle was burnt up, it happened just as Widow Nelly says, for I came in and twirled a lighted string beside it in spite of Tom begging me not. I did it to tease him."

"Oh, you did, did you, you imp of mischief!" cried Mrs. Morris; "then take that and that," and she bestowed a couple of hearty cuffs on Alec's ears, which she would probably have repeated had not Nelly interfered.

"Please, don't strike him, Mrs. Morris," she entreated. "Don't you see Alec is as sorry as possible already; and even if he were not, blows would not make him so?"

"I *am* sorry—I am, indeed, Widow Nelly," interrupted Alec—"more sorry than I've ever been in my life before. To think I might have been the death of baby, and have burnt poor Tom!"

And at the sight of Tom's bandaged hands

and burnt hair Alec burst into tears, whilst his mother, beside herself with mortification, swept him out of the garden and drove him home with a storm of angry reproaches.

Tom was standing in the garden path in the twilight, and again fancying that the chestnut trees were mocking him with their soft clapping and whispered chorus of "Bravo! bravo, Tom!—bravo! Trustable Tom!" and regretting that he could not water his pansies, when he heard Alec's voice calling to him from the gate.

"Please, let me in for a minute, Tom," he entreated, quite humbly. "I've not been able to get away till now; but I couldn't sleep to night without asking you and your mother to forgive me."

Alec's eyes were red and swollen, and his voice hoarse with crying. All his assurance and roughness of manner seemed to have deserted him.

"Why, of course we forgive you, Alec," called Widow Nelly from the door. "We know you did not mean any harm, though it

was a very foolish and wrong thing to do. Do you know, I'm quite glad you've come round to-night, Alec. Tom there is worrying himself because he can't water his flowers, and I'm too busy to do it for him, but I'm sure you will like the job."

Alec joyfully set to work. Widow Nelly could not have hit upon a better plan to comfort him and help Tom at the same time. The two boys soon became more friendly over the watering-pots than they had ever been before. Tom even told his companion his ideas about the pansy-faces, and made him see them too.

Every evening, until Tom's hands got well, Alec came in and did all manner of odds and ends of work for him, showing real interest and intelligence. Indeed he developed such a strong liking for gardening that he took in hand their own neglected piece of ground at home and set up as a rival.

One of the ladies who were interested in Widow Nelly sent her a pretty new cradle for baby on hearing of the disaster at the

cottage, and was the means of obtaining for her more orders for scent packets than she could possibly fulfil. So next year she took in a bit more ground and planted more rose bushes, and in course of time she and Tom made quite a business of it.

WAITING.

"I SHAN'T wait here any longer," said Rob, giving a kick to the table-leg.

"Muvver will come soon," replied little Elsie placidly. "Mary said we came down much too early. Muvver is still picking flowers; and then she will have to 'range them, you know."

"Well, I shan't wait," repeated Rob. "I shall go out, and come back presently to see the microscope." He clattered out, banging the door behind him as he went, and wee Elsie turned once more to the picture-book which Rob had amused himself with by pulling it to pieces.

Their mother had promised to show her

and Rob some curious things through a microscope which was to be lent to them that morning during the children's usual hour for coming to her; but Rob's impatience had brought them down long before their time. Elsie had looked at the pictures twice more, when she heard the door open, and her mother came in carrying the microscope.

"All alone, Elsie dear! Where is Rob?" she asked.

"He got tired of waiting, and went out."

"Tired of waiting! why, I am not late."

"No; but Rob made us come down a long time ago, and then he could not wait."

"Well, Elsie, *I* cannot wait for him now. The microscope has to go back to your cousin when James comes, so you and I must have our treat without Rob."

Elsie's mother showed her many marvellous sights during the next hour—the eye of a fly, the sting of a wasp, the tiny spider called the money-spinner, and a bit of a butterfly's wing. It seemed like an hour in fairy-land to Elsie, whose brown eyes looked twice their usual

size with wonder and happiness. She felt she had come back to the everyday world very suddenly when James opened the door, ready to take the microscope back to its owners. So deeply had Elsie been interested, that even Rob had been forgotten for the time.

"All gone, and Rob hasn't seen nuffing," she sighed. "O muvver, what will Rob say?"

"I am sorry for Rob, but I can't help it, Elsie dear. He has lost this great treat by his own impatience. It is quite time he learned that he cannot have everything just at the moment he wishes."

Here Rob burst into the room, hot and untidy, and with a face of astonished dismay.

"Mother! why, mother, there is James taking the microscope back, and I have not seen it yet!"

"I can't help that, Rob. If you will not control your impatient temper, you cannot expect others to wait always for you. I came at the time I promised to show it, and you knew it had to go back."

"Then Elsie's seen it all without me; it's a shame!" cried Rob; and throwing himself on the floor, he sobbed with disappointment.

His mother took no notice of him till he became quieter; then she called him, and he rose and came slowly towards her with a tear-stained face.

"I did want to see the things so, mother," he began. "I was tired of waiting here with nothing to do, so I went out and played with Rover, and forgot how time went."

"I am sorry, Rob, but you have only yourself to thank for your disappointment. Your impatience is always putting out people's plans, and for once you have punished yourself."

Rob considered this view of the subject for a minute.

"Well, I suppose that's fair, mother," he confessed at last. "At any rate, I shall take care not to do it again. But I do so hate waiting."

"BIRDIE, BIRDIE, SPRING IS COME."

"BIRDIE, Birdie, spring is come!" sang Flo, dancing into the nursery—"spring is quite come, and now you shall go free!"

The bullfinch who sat in his cage by the window put his head on one side and looked at Flo with bright black eyes.

"Yes," she went on, "the apple and pear blossoms are out, and the air is warm and sweet with sunshine. You won't catch cold now, Birdie, without a nest."

The little girl opened the cage door, and putting in her small fat finger, the bird immediately perched on it. He wasn't a bit afraid of Flo, you see.

As a baby, Birdie had been unfortunate. He had been born very early in the year, and one stormy night had been blown out of his nest. Flo and her brothers and sisters, running about the garden next morning, had found the poor, little, frightened, half-fledged bird fluttering with pitiful cries amongst the bushes, and she picked him up just in time to save him from the claws of the stable cat, which was prowling about in search of a meal.

Flo had a kind and loving little heart. She made a nest for the bird in her hands; and when they all came indoors, nurse hunted up an old bird-cage, in which they placed the little fellow in a nest of cotton-wool and moss. Since then it had been Flo's great delight to watch and feed him. She carried the cage about and placed it in the sunniest windows she could find. He was perfectly tame; but every day she promised him that as soon as the spring was really come, and it grew warm out of doors, he should be free to fly about with other birds. He had grown a fine,

handsome little fellow, and Flo loved him dearly; but she wanted him to be perfectly happy, so she kept her promise.

The little girl carried Birdie carefully downstairs on her finger, and went out into the garden; then she gave him a last kiss, and held out her hand. The bird fluttered his wings, and then folded them again.

"Fly away, Birdie; spring is come," she chanted again. And Birdie, taking a short flight, perched on the boughs of a hawthorn tree, under the nursery window.

"Now he is gone," sighed Flo. But he was not gone; and what is more, he never went. He had not been accustomed to fly about, and did not know other birds, not even his own brothers and sisters. But he knew kind little Flo, and loved her, so he never went farther away than the hawthorn tree. He liked to hop about in it, and peck at flies and caterpillars. Flo hung up his old cage outside the window with the door open, and found that as often as not he slept in it. He was the joy of her heart; for if she called,

"Birdie, Birdie," there was sure to be an answering call in a minute or two, and he would come and perch on the little finger held out to him. When winter came he seemed glad to come indoors and live in the nursery altogether.

THE END.

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